

The Hideout Trail

by Richard Johnston

If you're looking for something to do this week, my top recommendation is to hike the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge's newest trail. It is called the Hideout trail and has recently been formally opened to the public, although several hikers and Refuge staff have already sampled this short, but very nice trail. Last fall after construction was completed and again this spring, hikers have reported that the Hideout Trail is a great way see and experience Kenai National Wildlife Refuge.

Student Conservation Association volunteers, participating in the highly regarded high school work program, constructed the trail during 1998 and 1999. The 1.5-mile trail is now ready for general hiker use and new signs should make it easy to find. In recent years challenging day trails have become one of the most popular outdoor recreational activities on the Refuge. If you like Bear Mountain, Skyline, Fuller Lake, or Bernie's Trail, Hideout is sure to become a family tradition. It is short, yet challenging, with plenty of time left over to squeeze in dinner at your favorite restaurant or select another Refuge activity on the same afternoon.

The Hideout trail is located at approximately 1.5 miles from the east entrance of the Skilak Lake Road and has parking for 6-7 vehicles. The trail begins on the north (up-slope) side of the road. It starts at elevation 550 feet and climbs to 1500 feet at the top of a small unnamed mountain overlooking the Kenai River canyon and Skilak Lake. It's a great day trail for 40-something former serious hikers, families, and visitors who want a two-three hour round trip hike with great views. The trail is sunny and south facing, switch backing to the top through mostly open areas and meadows. Except during spring runoff, be sure to pack your own water. The area seems to be located in a rain shadow of the Kenai Mountains. Despite a relatively wet season on the Kenai during 1998, the trail builders were not rained on a single day during construction.

The first portion of the trail goes through an area burned by the 1991 Pothole Lake Fire where the natural meadows and vegetation breaks aided fire fighters and slowed the rapidly moving Memorial Day week-

end fire. Large standing dead cottonwoods that were killed by the wildfire provide a unique and almost surreal presence as one climbs to higher elevations. The lush regrowth of blue-joint reedgrass, fireweed, lupine, and elderberry following the burn make an excellent example of post-fire succession. Raspberries are abundant on the lower meadows and are quite popular with the youngsters.

Near the top, wild flowers are even more abundant and sprinkled among the crowberry carpet in sub-alpine meadows.

Whether observing a distant eagle floating on the wind or a woodpecker pounding on one of the numerous dead cottonwoods, the Hideout Trail is a good place to work on your list of bird sightings. On a recent outing, a Refuge biologist spotted juncos, several white-crowned sparrows and a tree swallow. Don't be surprised to see moose, small mammals, a lynx, or even a black bear.

Sweeping views of Skilak Lake begin almost as soon you leave the trailhead and are one of the main attractions of the trail, both hiking to the top and descending. After leaving the burn area, the trail meanders through open meadows and cottonwoods, then climbs moderately to the top. The high point is an outcrop with particularly good views of the Andrew Simons area of the Kenai Wilderness on the south side of the Kenai River and Skilak Lake. Bear and Russian Mountains and the Surprise Creek Valley are prominent, as is the 8,000-acre footprint of the Pothole fire.

The top point of the trail is a good place for lunch. The relatively open meadows of the south-facing approach give way to thick alders on top. If you like to struggle through dense alders, you could continue along the bench and snag a glimpse of Hidden Lake to the north, but my recommendation is to have lunch on top of the trail and then enjoy the downhill. The trail ends at an area above a steep rock outcrop, not quite a cliff, so watch your youngsters closely near the top and while resting for the return trip.

You probably won't need a compass or fully stocked knapsack for this trail, but be sure to bring your binoculars, water, wildlife and plant books, a jacket for the top and a sense of adventure. And don't

forget to bring the kids...these short trails are good way to kindle a sense of adventure and develop future Harding Ice Field explorers.

Rick Johnston is a Ranger/Pilot for the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. For more information on the

Hideout Trail or other outdoor recreation opportunities on Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, contact Rick or other staff members at Refuge Headquarters. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.